Dear Alice,

I have been seeing my boyfriend for four weeks. He has told me all about his past relationships. Is it safe to stop using condoms now?

Signed,
One at a Time?

Answer

Dear One at a Time?,

Whether or not it's safe to stop using condoms with your boyfriend is a complex question. There are several factors to consider, and ultimately you are the only judge of what level of risk you are willing to take. When used correctly and consistently, condoms are very effective at preventing pregnancy, the transmission of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and many sexually transmitted infections (STIs). If you're considering not using them, it's best to consider the pros and cons of non-use and to come up with an alternative plan to protect one another in the future.

You mention that you've spoken with your boyfriend about his past relationships, which is great. Communicating about each other's pasts is a key part of protecting yourselves in the present. While you're in a sharing mood, you and your partner might go ahead and get tested for STIs and share your results with each other prior to your decision about condom use. Keep in mind that even if someone is totally honest about their past and test results, there is always the possibility that they have an STI has yet to show symptoms or has an incubation period during which they are undetectable by tests (e.g. HIV). Also, many STIs can be asymptomatic — meaning people can have them and transmit them to her/his partner(s) unknowingly without any symptoms present.

As you continue to work through your decision with your partner, it's also good to be aware that the risk of becoming infected with an STI during the course of your relationship will increase for both of you if you're not using condoms. Have you and your boyfriend discussed being monogamous (having sex with only each other)? Doing so typically reduces your risk of STI transmission but it does not make either partner immune to risk. If you haven't already, you might want to discuss a game plan in the event that one of you has an unplanned sexual encounter outside your relationship. Also, many people practice what is referred to as ?serial monogamy?. Basically, that means you only have sex with one person at a time, for a limited
period of time, and then you have sex with someone else. While serial monogamy is a common relationship pattern for many people, the drawback is thinking you’re safe simply because you’re monogamous. However, this kind of monogamy typically lasts a relatively short period of time — four weeks, two months, a year — and then you start dating someone else. You begin to feel safe and comfortable with her/him, so you may stop using condoms, each time subjecting yourself to the risk of contracting or transmitting STIs (for more information on STIs, check out the Go Ask Alice! Sexual Health archives).

Additionally, are condoms your primary method of birth control? If so, and you decide to stop using condoms, consult with your health care provider to determine an alternative method that will work best for you and your partner. It’s good to note that many common hormonal methods can take a week or more to become effective. If you continue using condoms and they are currently your only method of birth control, consider having a backup method at the ready to prevent an unintended pregnancy as a result of breakage or misuse.

Lastly, before you nix the prophylactics, you may also want to further explore the reasons why you are considering not using condoms anymore. Is it something you feel comfortable with? Are you ready to trust your partner that much? Do you have enough information to know that neither of you will be at risk for transmitting an STI? What are the benefits of stopping condom use, and what are the risks? These are all valuable questions to discuss as honestly and openly as you can with your partner.

Remember, the decision to stop using condoms is ultimately yours and your boyfriend's to make together; hopefully this response will give you enough information to continue the conversation you've already started.

Best wishes to you,

Alice!

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